

**SOCIAL PARENTING:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY FOR THE PREVENTION OF  
FAMILY DIFFICULTIES**

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Informal Relationships between Adults,  
Unrelated Children, and the Children's Parents

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## Introduction

Though it is called "fictive kinship" by anthropologists (e.g., Stack, 1974), or "chosen family" by contemporary writers (e.g., Lindsey, 1981), or "swap dog kin" by some Southern blacks (e.g., Gutman, 1977), there is no commonly understood term for describing family-like bonds between non-relatives. Thus, one of the first tasks of my dissertation was to decide upon a term that could signify the phenomenon I was studying: how close relationships between adults and other people's children begin, how they are maintained, and the effect of these relationships on the adults, the children, and the children's parents. I chose the term "social parenting" because "social" connotes a role distinguishable from one of biological origins and "parenting" suggests the nurturing qualities of an adult-child relationship.

The adults, or social parents, in my study are not relatives of the children (e.g., aunts or grandparents), are not paid for their relationship with them (e.g., babysitters or teachers), are not program volunteers (e.g., big brothers), and are not romantic partners of the children's parents (e.g., boyfriend or stepmother). The social parents are friends, neighbors, or housemates who have voluntarily and informally formed significant, long-lasting relationships with the children.

My dissertation defines, describes, and analyzes key dimensions of social parenting practices including varieties of social parenting relationships, how these relationships begin, how they are practiced, the kinds of problems encountered in them, their benefits, how people name these relationships, how the relationships fit into their social contexts, and the implications of this research for policy, practice, education, and for people involved in social parenting practices.

Though the social work profession has not directly studied social parenting, this phenomenon addresses several issues that concern us, our clients, and the general public. In this paper I describe findings and conclusions related to one major interest of social workers: informal family support systems.

In the past decade we have become more attuned to the significance of social support networks to prevent and/or ameliorate a variety of human problems that are aggravated by social isolation, for example, Collins and Pancoast's (1976) work on natural helping networks and Garbarino's (1977) analysis of the ecological contexts of child abuse. The findings reported here suggest that social parenting relationships can effectively provide a variety of mutually beneficial forms of emotional and concrete support to families.

## Research Methods

### A Qualitative Approach

Because little is known about my topic, my research is an exploratory study which relied upon qualitative research methods. I took advantage of the departure from conventional quantitative methods by further pursuing innovative, less orthodox methods to guide my research. In particular, I relied upon experiential analysis. This method was developed by Shulamit Reinharz, a co-chair of my committee, in her doctoral dissertation On Becoming a Social Scientist (1979).

My experience as a social parent inspired this study and I drew upon and analyzed it to inform all the phases of my research. The research is, therefore, a blend of both "subjective" and "objective" knowledge. My preconceived research questions were generated largely from my experiences as a social parent but were also derived from literature on adoptive and foster parenting, stepparenthood, grandparenthood, godparenthood, childcare programs, friendship, and motherhood. The questions structured my investigation yet were posed broadly to permit the development and refinement of new insights (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

### Recruitment of Participants

I interviewed "primary parents" (the child's parent who had the most responsibility for childraising, almost always the mother) and social parents in fifteen families. The families were purposively recruited through various advertisements and networking methods. Prospective participants who responded to advertisements, or whom I contacted on the basis of a referral, were screened according to seven minimal criteria and six "sample enhancement" criteria. The minimal criteria were: the social parent is eighteen or older; the social parent is not related to the child by blood, marriage, or romantic ties to the parent; the social parent is not in the relationship under organizational auspices; the social parent is not currently being paid for time spent with the child; the social parent has fairly stable, ongoing contact with the child; the social parent spends time with the child independently from the child's parents; the social parent's relationship with the child has lasted at least one year; and the child is twelve years of age or less. The enhancement criteria sought diversity according to: the age of the social parents; the shared vs. separate household living arrangements of the social parents and the families; the sex of the social parents; the sexual preference of the social parents; the marital status of the primary parents; and the participants' social-economic status. With the exception of having gay and lesbian social parents, all of the enhancement criteria were attained to varying extents. Table I summarizes some major demographic characteristics of the participants.

TABLE 1

### THE PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

<u>Age of Participants</u>	<u>Social Parents (N=18)*</u>	<u>Primary Parents (N=16)**</u>
20-25	1	1
26-30	3	1
31-35	5	7
36-40	3	5
41-50	2	2
51-60	2	0
61-70	2	0

<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>Social Parents (N=18)*</u>	<u>Primary Parents (N=16)**</u>
Single	11	8
Married	7	8
<u>Employment Status</u>		
Full-time employed	12	10
Part-time employed (30 hrs or less)	1	3
Full-time employed, part-time students	1	0
Part-time employed, full-time students	3	0
Homemakers	0	3
Retired	1	0
<u>Sex</u>		
Female	11	15
Male	7	1
<u>Number of Children</u>		
0	12	0
1	0	10
2	1	2
3	2	3
<u>Age and Sex of the Children</u>		
<u>Age</u>	<u>Female (N=12)</u>	<u>Male (N=11)</u>
1-3	1	2
4-6	2	3
7-10	7	4
11-12	2	2

\*6 of the 18 social parents were members of 3 social parenting married couples.

\*\*2 primary parents were co-parents; they equally divided the responsibility for caring for their child so both were included in the study.

## Interview Methods

After acceptance into the study and prior to the interviews, the participants were sent a "preview" summary of the questions and topics I wanted to explore with them. The previews reminded them of the appointment, gave them a chance to gather their thoughts, provided the basis for realistic expectations of the interview, and assured that the participants were fully informed and consenting.

I intensively interviewed the participants with the use of a semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 1982). The questions were grouped into fifteen general themes: personal background, the origins of the relationships, the nature of the present relationship, the type of relationship between the social and primary parents, the participants' assessment of the social parent-primary parent relationship, the effects of social parenting on the children, the influence of the social parents' parental status on their choice to be social parents, the social parenting history of the primary parents, comparisons of the social parenting relationship to relationships with extended family members, the reactions of other people to the social parenting relationship, how the social parents name their role, their future plans, their assessment of how these relationships affect family living, reactions to a projective question, and desired social reforms regarding social parenting relationships, if any. The interviews, which usually lasted at least two hours, were tape recorded and later transcribed. Though the children are not official participants in the study, I interviewed one twelve year old girl to provide insight into the child's perspective on these relationships. I met and had some degree of interaction with 17 of the 23 children who were indirectly involved in the study.

## Data Analysis

I performed a content analysis of the transcripts, supplemented by field notes. I coded onto notecards the participants' responses to the fifteen general theme questions which structured the interviews. I also developed seventeen participant-generated themes from the transcripts and coded any responses which fit into them. In coding the summarized responses, I noted the page numbers of the transcripts in which I found illustrative or noteworthy quotations to incorporate into my manuscript, which is replete with the participants' own words.

## **Findings**

### Reducing Isolation

The fairly frequent and reliable contact with the social parent serves to reduce family isolation. In part, this is an artifact of the sampling method. However, it is the nature of the contact which suggests the substantive significance of the relationship. Serving as an "extended family" member (e.g., an "aunt"), a "supplemental parent," or as a "friend," the social parent can compensate for the absence of a parent or an extended family member, fulfilling functions associated with those roles. In an era when the size of families is smaller, when two-fifths of all families are headed by one parent, and when extended family members are likely to live a distance from the family, the social parent can help repopulate a family's "tribe" of significant others. The majority of the participants reported that they rarely see their relatives or have no extended family. Distance is not the

only thing separating some families. Two mothers reported sharp value differences between the families and their relatives. For example, Gloria, a single mother, told me:

My brother feels put out that I'm relying on another man, a neighbor, to fill a role that he would be willing to fill. But he lives about an hour and a half drive from here. I says, "Jack, you can't supply what Ted can supply right now, with the consistency of seeing someone everyday and having a good role model." I don't want my kids to grow up to be like my brother. He drinks too much and spends too much time hunting. I want them to know there's other things in life besides partying and having a good time (pp. 201-202).

In three families the children preferred the social parents over relatives who live close by. For example, a single mother whose twelve year old son lives only around the block from his aunt and uncle said, "If Peter had a problem, he would go to Gary [the social parent] before his aunt and uncle" (p. 202).

### Support

The social parents supplement the emotional and material resources of the family. One primary parent described her satisfaction this way:

I think there's an inborn tension in parents that we want to give our kids more than we know we can, really, if you're honest with yourself. When someone like Sandy's around, you have the knowledge that maybe you're not the one giving it, but the kid is getting more than you could give. And it eases up the friction. And then the parents are freed up to feel better about themselves and the whole darn thing works better (p. 155).

The social parents seem to recognize the parents' needs, are willing to help take care of the children when asked, and they offer help without the parents always having to request it. At moments when the primary parent feels overwhelmed and unable to cope rationally with the demands of childraising, the social parents can be called upon to give them a short break from their children. In several cases the social parents served as sounding boards and were able to offer advice and support to the parents when they were attempting to resolve a childrearing problem. A single mother who shared the same household with a social parenting, married couple described how the wife, Rachel, was able to help her with her daughter, Diana:

Well, it's totally different from when I was living alone. Not that I never asked advice of people, but never was anyone so intimately involved with Diana. So if I asked somebody, like for instance my friend Mary who has raised a son, and I say "Look, this is what's going on. What do you think?", she'd always give me real good advice, but it was always the thing, "Gee, she really hasn't spent much time with Diana. Did I describe the situation correctly? Did she really get a sense of what's going on?"

This is the first time when I've had the tremendous benefit of having someone who knows Diana, who is just intimately involved, who sees what goes on everyday so if I say, "Does Diana seem kind of this way to you?", then Rachel can say, "Oh yeah, but I think this is what's going on." And we can just discuss it . . . (pp. 151-2)

The social parent's position on the boundary of the family allows a unique vantage point, objective yet intimately familiar.

The social parents can offer other forms of emotional support. Two mothers mentioned how essential the social parent was during stressful periods in their lives when they were in danger of being immobilized by depression. The social parents assumed more of their parental responsibilities and were willing to listen to them and help them through their problems. Some mothers mentioned how the social parents have helped to defuse potential conflicts with their children, especially those intensely fed by excessive identification with the child. For example, one social parent is the child's math tutor because the mother loses her patience when helping her daughter with her homework. A single mother reported that sharing a household with the social parent helped defuse the formerly intense conflicts which seemed to arise from "too much togetherness." Primary parents also reported that the social parents help them socialize their children by being another source of validation for their authority and goals. Finally, the social parent's presence in the family's life and his or her active appreciation of the child seems to confirm that the child is basically an attractive and lovable person; on some level, the parents must be doing something right. This can bolster parents' sense of competency, increasing their confidence in their ability to be "good" parents.

### Childcare

Childcare is among the most difficult problems families with young children must manage, particularly if the mother is the single head of household and/or is employed full-time. The presence of the social parent permits a redistribution of parental responsibilities through the social parent's supplementary childcare activities. Though the nuclear or single parent core structure of the family remains intact, the quality of the parenthood experience is transformed. "Relief" was the most common term participants chose to describe the effects of the social parenting for the primary parents. Yet, this benefit is not for the parents alone. The children benefit, and so do the social parents.

### Benefits for the Children

Among the many benefits the participants reported, the children gain from having the extra attention provided by another adult who cares deeply about them. This enhances their self-esteem and gives them a sense of greater emotional security. As one mother put it, "It makes Isaac feel special because he has Carl and other kids don't. And he knows it." (p. 158). The social parents can be confidantes to the children, giving them someone to share their secrets with and talk over things they would not necessarily tell their parents, such as:

Sex. She had someone to talk to about those things. I think it makes a big difference. Sex and makeup and boys and who am I. All those important questions that you hope your kid will talk to you about, that maybe you're not the best person initially for that. So she had someone there she could count on (p. 157).

The time children spend with social parents is often recreational in nature, giving the children a wider range of experiences than they necessarily would have if they only did things with their parents. The social parents are usually generous with presents, and a couple of them even contribute to the families' income, allowing the child a higher standard of living than he or she would otherwise have. Some participants likened the social parent role to that of the grandparent who can be the "spoiler," giving the child the extra goodies that the parents might be more likely to withhold. Finally, the social parent provides the child with another adult role model, exposing him or her to more lifestyles, values, and opinions, thereby increasing the child's sense of adult role options.

### Benefits for the Social Parents

Social parents gain from the love, affection and admiration they receive from the children. They enjoy spending time with the children, playing with them, teaching them about the wonders of the world, or just passing time together in front of a television. They appreciate being able to see the children and be with them on their terms, when they are ready, willing and able, instead of having the full responsibility that the child's parents have. For those who do not have children, the role allows them to rehearse what parenthood might be like:

I think everybody questions their ability to be a parent, or at least, most people do. And I never knew if I had too much temper, or maybe I would be selfish as a parent. Now I know that I would want to have kids and my confidence is better. I'm not afraid of it anymore . . . (p. 145).

Several social parents said this rehearsal is fun; they enjoy "feeling like a parent." One social parent, who was voluntarily sterilized, felt that having a long term, publicly known relationship with two children made her more socially acceptable to other adults who are parents.

### Implications

My discussion of the implications of this research is grounded in a proposition I derived from the findings: that social parenting relationships can be viable, beneficial family support systems. Among many aspects of a proposed reform agenda, which includes implications for further research, training, and education, I suggest broadening the definition of "family" to include "significant others" because several participants experienced obstacles to their relationships which stem from a lack of social recognition and legitimacy. Including "significant others" in invitations to social settings that have been traditionally perceived as "family only" functions would help social parents and families gain more acceptance for their relationships in the communities in which they live. So for example, social parents, especially because many are actively involved in enhancing the



child's education and in encouraging them in their extra-curricular pursuits, would be included in invitations to school functions. Similar reforms could be in the areas of "family" passes or discounts for non-profit or profit-making recreational organizations, such as a public swimming pool. In employment practices, people who are "significant others" could be extended the same considerations that are needed when employees have "family" emergencies. Similarly, hospital visitation policies could be reformed from "immediate family members only" to a limit on the number of visitors or visits, with perhaps immediate kin receiving priority.

In the area of practice, I recommend that social workers systematically assess a family's informal support system and to include social parents, where present, in interventions with children and families. The methods proposed by Pancoast (1980), though originally designed for work with abusive and neglectful families, seem to be generalizable tools for finding and cultivating social parent relationships to enhance the informal support available to families whose problems may be of a less serious nature.

With regard to programming, it might be desirable for "foster kin" programs, such as big brother and sister or foster grandparent programs, to encourage the volunteers to build relationships with the children and families which more closely resemble social parenting. Parent aide programs, intended primarily as support for parents who have had contact with child protective services, could also consider an expansion of the parent aide role to include some social parent functions, or the supplementation of the parent aide services with social parent figures.

### Conclusion

Recognizing the existence of social parenting practices can encourage social workers and others who are concerned about the problems of contemporary families to view family relationships as an integral part of larger community relations, where the boundaries between families and outsiders are more permeable and potentially more open to positive influences than previously imagined. This dissertation research shows that one way we social workers can discover preventive solutions for family difficulties is to study how some families have developed relationships that are enriching, resilient, and effective means of meeting a variety of needs. In this way, we can affirm families' creative, spontaneous, and self-determined strivings for health and well-being.

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